

Handbooks of hunting opportunities

Sometimes it's helpful to look at things from a different perspective. For instance, that guy annoyingly honking his horn behind you on the road could, in fact, be someone trying to let you know that you've left your cell phone on the roof of your vehicle.

So it is with Montana's hunting regulations. At a glance, these official Fish and Wildlife Commission-established game seasons, limits, and other laws and regulations list all the things a hunter *can't* do. But they can also be viewed as a list of all the things a hunter *can* do.

Think of them as handbooks of hunting opportunities.

That's because the regulations booklets contain every hunting option in this state—including some incredible ones. For instance, look through the deer, elk, and antelope regs for hunting districts that allow hunting for "either-sex" elk by permit only. That indicates the areas hold some very big bulls. Bulls grow large antlers when allowed to live longer, and the reduced hunting pressure created by permit drawings lets some elk reach trophy size.

What are the odds of drawing a permit for those areas? That information is in the booklet, too, on the pages showing statistics for the previous year's drawings. There you can find which hunting districts (HD) have the most hunters applying compared to the number of permits available—like HD339, HD380, HD410, and HD632. That indicates the quality of elk hunting available for lucky hunters who draw those tags.

Similarly, the moose, sheep, and goat regulations contain essential information for anyone hoping to draw those coveted tags, including hunting district boundaries and success rates of previous applicants.

The regulations booklets get a bad rap for being too thick and complicated, and rightly so. But compared to what? I went saltwater fishing in British Columbia last year, and the regulations were as complex as anything Montana issues for big game hunting. Most states, especially those offering abundant elk opportunities, have regulations as complicated as ours.

In large part, that's because we are managing elk and deer at a smaller and smaller scale to account for widely varying habitats, populations, and landowner tolerances in different parts of the state. In some cases, we're trying to grow deer and elk herds that have been hurt by severe weather or overharvest. There, we make harvest regulations more conservative. In other areas, we're trying to shrink deer and elk herds that have outgrown available habitat or become undue nuisances to landowners. In those cases, we liberalize regulations to increase harvest, which lowers herd size to previously established objectives.

By customizing harvest regulations for each hunting district, which requires constant population monitoring and hunter harvest analysis, we've been able to steadily grow Montana's herds. Just look

at our elk population—from 40,000 in 1990 to between 150,000 and 160,000 today. That increase is in large part reflected in the thick booklets of regulations that hunters carry around in their trucks and backpacks each fall.

FWP could make the booklets thinner. The easiest way would be to apply blanket seasons and harvest restrictions statewide. When we did that back in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, the regulations booklet was a lot smaller than it is now. But taking that approach today would likely mean imposing conservative regulations statewide, with much shorter seasons, so that we didn't end up putting too much harvest pressure on hunting districts where deer and elk herds were struggling. And those conservative regulations would mean that areas that have too many deer and elk wouldn't receive the hunting pressure they needed, resulting in even more depredation for landowners.

Simpler regulations would in many cases mean far fewer opportunities for hunters and far more problems for landowners.

Another thing to know is that the Fish and Wildlife Commission

The hunting regulations can also be viewed as a list of all the things a hunter can do in Montana.



scrutinizes any proposed new hunting law or rule before it ends up in the regulations booklets. Most regulations that our biologists and game wardens propose get the green light, but sometimes commission members, appointed to represent the Montana public, modify proposals to make them simpler. If not for the commission, the regulations would be even more complex.

We'd all like to see hunting regulations simplified and made easier to understand. FWP and others are working on that. But if hunters viewed the booklets as handbooks of hunting opportunities, and understood that many of those regulations are meant to squeeze as much hunting opportunity out of big game herds as possible while still conserving populations and managing depredation, maybe the regulations publications would seem a little less bulky.

—M. JEFF HAGENER, *Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Director*